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SUBJECT: DONNYBROOKS AND DEBACLES: BELGIUM'S REGIONAL
ELECTION CAMPAIGNS HEAT UP

¶1. Summary: The Belgian regional and European elections will be held on June 7, and both Flemish and Francophone parties have used mudslinging tactics to get ahead in the polls. For the Flemish elections, the media fight between the Liberals and the populist Lijst Dedecker have hurt both parties, and allowed the Christian Democrats to maintain a lead. It is unclear whether these three parties could form a center-right coalition with a fourth party or whether a center left coalition might be formed that includes the Liberals and the weaker Socialists or even the Greens. On the Francophone side, the Liberals and Socialists are fighting hard for first place; the Liberals would like to exclude the Socialists from the new regional government, but it is unclear if the Greens or the Center Humanist party would join them in a coalition. The parties forming the post-June 7 regional governments might make strong arguments that the national government should be reshuffled to match the regional mix. The European election campaigns between former Liberal PM Guy Verhofstadt and former Christian Democrat PM Jean-Luc Dehaene have not resulted in the same level of vitriol or picked up as much press. End Summary.

INTRODUCTION

¶2. Mudslinging, scandals and defections have so far dominated the Belgian campaign for the June 7 regional and European elections. On the weighty issues, like the soaring budget deficit, political leaders are treading with caution. They know that after June 7 the federal government will have to tackle the soaring budget deficit, and that regional governments will have no choice but to cut their expenditures.

FLUCTUATIONS AND FIGHTING IN FLANDERS

¶3. The Flemish regional campaign centers on the contest between Christian Democrats (CD&V) and liberals (Open VLD) for leadership of the region. Five years ago, the CD&V had coaxed the nationalist New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) into an alliance. This combination (CD&V-N-VA) was successful, not only in the 2004 elections but also in the general elections of 2007 and was easily the largest party grouping. The alliance ended in late 2008, and the CD&V is now running alone. At the outset of the campaign the Open VLD sensed that it had a real chance at beating the CD&V. By becoming the largest party of the region, it would be in a position to claim the Minister-President portfolio for Open VLD party president Bart Somers. However, Somers made a serious blunder by offering in writing a parliamentary seat or matching pay to a potential defector from another rival party, Lijst Dedecker (LDD). Somers' blunder forced the party to drop him from the top of the list and substitute regional minister Dirk Van Mechelen at the head of the list in the last two weeks before the election. The ensuing media vitriol between Open VLD and the populist LDD has lowered the standing of both parties, and allowed the CD&V to rise into

the front runner's position. At this stage of the campaign, a continuation of the current three-party coalition of CD&V, Open VLD, and Socialist (sp.a) appears to be the most likely outcome of the election. However, the current weakness of the sp.a could pave the way for smaller parties to join a coalition. The most recent poll had the sp.a at 14.2 percent of the popular vote, a historic low for the party. Until recently, the Greens (Groen!) seemed unlikely to perform well, but the most recent poll showed their support rising to almost nine percent.

14. Disseminating a new brand of populism, the LDD list of Representative Jean-Marie Dedecker is an unknown quantity for political pundits. A strong LDD showing on June 7 would likely come at the expense of Open VLD, Dedecker's former party, and the extreme-right Vlaams Belang (VB). With the new LDD option for right wing voters, the VB will not be able to repeat its previous 24 percent showing in the 2004 regional elections. Dedecker dreams of forming a center-right coalition composed of CD&V, Open VLD and his own party. The most recent polls show that these three parties might need the support of N-VA to command a majority in the Flemish regional parliament. The majority of the Flemish vote will be center-right and right wing, but will not necessarily lead to a center-right Flemish regional government.

HOW GREEN WAS MY PARTY: MR COURTS THE FRANCOPHONE GREENS

15. It has been the life-long ambition of Francophone Liberal (MR) leader Didier Reynders to break the Socialist hegemony in Francophone Belgium. He failed in the regional elections of 2004, and his party was kicked out of the regional

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coalitions in Wallonia and Brussels. His stated goal of removing the Socialists from office has resulted in open and unending feuding between the Socialist PS and Liberal MR, impacting negatively on the performance of the current federal government, of which they both are part of. The mudslinging between the two has led to the current insult hurling between the PS and MR leaders. The most recent polls indicate that the Socialists have the upper hand in Wallonia, and that Reynders will have to seek the support from third parties to overcome the Socialists. In Wallonia the Christian Democratic CDH is locked in a contest with the Greens (Ecolo) for third position. Ecolo long ago shed its traditional green trappings. Contrary to its Flemish counterpart, Ecolo has learned that a leftist view of world affairs does not win votes. Ecolo is currently experiencing a spectacular climb in the polls, and could become the second largest party of Brussels and third largest of Wallonia. Reynders is actively courting Ecolo, hoping to form a coalition of Liberals, Christian Democrats and Greens.

THE CAPITAL OF BELGIUM AND OF EUROPE

16. In the predominantly Francophone Brussels capital region, the Flemish parties have a guaranteed number of seats in the regional parliament and ministries in the government. This legal requirement results in large coalitions. The MR is the largest party of the region, but in 2004 it was excluded from the majority coalition by a Socialist-led coalition of Christian Democrats, the Francophone Greens and Open VLD, six parties in total.

17. So far, the European parliament campaign has failed to appear on the radar screen. Two former prime ministers, Guy Verhofstadt of Open VLD and Jean-Luc Dehaene from CD&V, are running for office, but they have decided to avoid personal attacks, opting for academic discussions on the future of the Union. There are slight differences of opinion between the two. Verhofstadt is positioning himself as the champion of a federal Europe, while his older colleague is focusing on steps to achieve more cohesion among the 27 member states. Verhofstadt has let it be known that he would not serve as

Belgium's EU commissioner under outgoing EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso.

COMMENT

18. Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy, one of the country's most seasoned politicians, has avoided involvement in the regional and European campaigns from the outset. He knows that joining the fray would undermine the federal government's stability. The latest verbal confrontation between his Vice Premiers Reynders and Laurette Onkelinx (PS), and her veiled threat to leave the national government, has demonstrated just how real that danger is. The outcome of June 7 will impact the federal government. It will most likely cause a federal government reshuffle, and in a worst case scenario result in a protracted crisis. Van Rompuy has repeatedly stated that after the election, the federal government will have to tackle the rapidly deteriorating budget situation. To achieve his goal he will need the full cooperation from the new regional governments. Consequently, a federal government with the same parties that run the new regional governments would be his best outcome.

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